



*“Most people can never, even for a moment, disentangle themselves from the restraints imposed by those around them, nor can they disregard their approval. From the moment they begin to understand their parents’ smiles and frowns they have needed the moment to moment approval of everyone, even strangers...These people measure their entire worth by what others think of them.”*

*Richard Taylor, Restoring Pride*

Most of us care too much about what other people think of us. We value social approval too highly and we possess an irrational fear of disapproval, criticism, and rejection. Instead of forging a path through life that aligns with our talents, strengths and desires, we conform to the wants and expectations of others. Some of us even let our dreams die because we fear how we will be judged if we pursue them. In this video, we are going to explore how we can diminish an excessive need for social approval and overcome the life-inhibiting fear of social disapproval.

*“I have never wished to satisfy the crowd; for what I know, they do not approve, and what they approve, I do not know.”*

*Epicurus, Quoted in Seneca, Epistles*

A useful first step to cultivating a healthier attitude to the opinions of others is to reflect on the character of the individuals whose approval we seek. Are such individuals deserving of our respect and admiration? Are they flourishing or stagnating? Do they possess courageous, independent, and inquisitive minds capable of seeking the truth and forming and voicing their own opinions? Or are they cowardly conformists who uncritically accept and regurgitate whatever it is they are told by the mainstream news, celebrities, social media personalities, and politicians? If an individual does not impress us, why should we care if our way of life impresses them?

“Why do you take pleasure in praise from those you cannot praise yourself?”

*Seneca, Epistles*

Or as Arthur Schopenhauer echoed:

*“What goes on in other people’s consciousness is, as such, a matter of indifference to us; and in time we get really indifferent to it, when we come to see how superficial and futile are most people’s thoughts, how narrow their ideas, how mean their sentiments, how perverse their opinions, and how much of error there is in most of them.”*

*Arthur Schopenhauer, The Wisdom of Life*

Conditioning ourselves to be indifferent to the approval of a single individual is one thing. However, when in the presence of a group, or crowd of people, the need for approval can be especially strong, and sometimes this need manifests as a social anxiety that cripples our capacity to flourish. When giving a speech or performance, we grow tense and jittery and unable to perform to the best of our ability. At social gatherings we are awkwardly self-conscious and unable to act with natural spontaneity. And worst of all, the social anxiety that lies behind an excessive need for the approval of groups inhibits us from following our conscience; even when we know what we are saying or doing is wrong, we sheepishly follow the crowd.

According to the stoic philosopher Epictetus, to tame this social anxiety we should reflect on the nature of a crowd. For as Epictetus stated regarding the individual who is socially anxious:

*“...he doesn’t know what a crowd is, or the applause of a crowd...what the praise of the mass of people is, and what value it holds in life, these are things that he neither knows nor has ever studied. So here he is bound to tremble and turn pale.”*

*Epictetus, Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*

Most people relate to a crowd as if it were an entity in its own right, and so naturally they grow intimidated by its presence. However, in reality a crowd is nothing more than a collection of individuals gathered in one location or else united by a common sentiment. When in the presence of a crowd if we train ourselves to see and relate to single individuals, rather than to the crowd as a whole, it is much easier to diminish an anxious need for approval. For just as we should be indifferent to the approval of a single individual who we do not respect, the same applies to a collection of individuals who happen to be congregated together. Or as the Roman philosopher and statesman Cicero wrote:

*“What could be more absurd than to suppose the same ignorant and common people you despise, when taken one by one, are of any greater consequence when taken together?”*

*Cicero, Tusculan Disputations*

In some cases, however, a group or crowd is composed of individuals with impressive minds and admirable characters. Yet even in such a situation, what such individuals think of us is not in our control, and so it should not be our concern. All we can do is carry ourselves with integrity and try to refrain from doing anything that is deserving of disdain, and then gracefully accept whatever opinions they form of us. Or as Epictetus stated:

“No good man grieves or groans, no one wails, no one turns pale and trembles and says, “How will he receive me, how will he listen to me?” Slave, he will act as he sees fit. Why do you care about other people’s business?”

*Epictetus, Discourses*

Along with tempering our need for social approval, overcoming the fear of disapproval, ridicule, and rejection is also life-promoting. We need to be able to maintain a state of calm indifference when attacked by the stings of other people’s scorn – be it online or in the real world. Epictetus advised that when we are the target of another’s contempt, the first thing we should do is pause and allow ourselves to take a breath before we react, as immediate or reflexive reactions are often self-defeating. If we take a moment to compose ourselves, we will be free to choose a response that is appropriate to the situation.

“Human freedom involves our capacity to pause between the stimulus and response and, in that pause, to choose the one response toward which we wish to throw our weight.”

*Rollo May, The Courage to Create*

Or as Epictetus observed:

“Remember that you are insulted not by the person who strikes or abuses you but by your opinion that these things are insulting. So whenever another provokes you... try above all...not to allow yourself to be carried away by the impression; for if you delay things and gain time to think, you’ll find it easier to gain control of yourself.”

*Epictetus, Enchiridion*

One of the more powerful ways to respond to insults or ridicule is to “listen like a stone”. This involves reacting to the person as a stone would react. In other words, it is to not react at all. We let their words fall on deaf ears, go about our business, and pretend the other person does not exist. This response is effective for two reasons. Firstly, when someone insults or ridicules us, one of the things they want is to provoke a reaction. They want to feel their words have power over us. In listening like a stone, we refrain from satisfying their will to power and show them, by doing nothing, that their provocations are petty and not able to move us. Secondly, as our thoughts and emotions are influenced by our actions, in reacting like a stone we become stone-like internally:

“It is the mark of a great mind to rise above insults; the most humiliating kind of revenge is to treat your adversary as not worth taking revenge upon...The great and noble are those who, like a lordly beast, listen unmoved to the barking of little dogs.”

*Seneca, On Anger*

Or as Epictetus explained:

“What does it mean...to be abused? Go up to a stone and subject it to abuse; what effect will you produce? Well then, if you listen like a stone, what will anyone who abuses you be able to achieve?”

*Epictetus, Discourses*

Another strategy is to respond to contempt with humor. Humor diffuses the tension of the situation; it shows the other person we are not going to lower ourselves to their level and respond to their vileness in kind, nor feed the flames of their anger. An especially witty remark can even turn an enemy into a friend. But perhaps most importantly, humor breeds power – as it is the mark of the powerful to be amused by those who are mistreating them. Or as Seneca observed:

“Some are offended if a hairdresser jostles them; they see an insult in the surliness of a doorkeeper, the arrogance of an attendant, the haughtiness of a valet. What laughter such things should draw! With what satisfaction should your mind be filled when you contrast your own peace of mind with the unrest into which others blunder!”

*Seneca, On the Constancy of the Wise Man*

The philosopher Diogenes was a master at the art of using humor to sweeten his dealings with disagreeable people. When insulted by a bald man Diogenes responded: *“I’ll not insult you in return, but simply congratulate your hair for having taken flight from such an evil head.”* Another time someone informed him that a fellow philosopher was speaking badly of him, and so Diogenes replied: *“That’s nothing to wonder at, since he’s never learned to speak well.”* When heckled by a group of men, Diogenes yelled back *“Come over here, men!”* As they approached, Diogenes casually dismissed them by saying *“I called for men, not scum!”*

Occasionally, however, the humor we use should be directed at ourselves. For sometimes insults contain kernels of truth. Rather than showing offence to insults that hit the mark, we are far better off recognizing that, like everyone else, we have flaws, quirks, foibles, and blind spots that can and should be the object of humor. If we stop taking ourselves so seriously and develop a healthy humility, then we can laugh *with* the person who is laughing at us, and thus ruin his or her attempts to disturb us. The French philosopher Montaigne wrote that a worthy goal is *“to be equally laughable and able to laugh”* (Montaigne, *Essays*). Seneca observed that: *“No one is laughable who can laugh at himself.”* (Seneca, *On the Firmness of the Wise Man*) While Epictetus stated:

“If you hear that someone has spoken ill of you, do not make excuses about what was said, but answer: “Evidently he didn’t know about my other faults, or he wouldn’t have spoken only of the ones he did.”

*Epictetus, Enchiridion*

Ultimately, however, the greatest antidote to caring too much about what people think of us, is to cultivate confidence in ourselves. If we are insecure and plagued by feelings of inferiority, we will be slavishly dependent on the approval of other people, and forever fearful of their scorn. If, on the other hand, we focus our time and energy on strengthening mind and body, improving our character, achieving our goals, and sculpting a life to be proud of, then what others think of us – be it good or bad – will dwindle into the realm of insignificance. Or as Epictetus stated:

“If you are ever tempted to look for outside approval, realize that you have compromised your integrity. If you need a witness, be your own.” (Enchiridion)

*Epictetus, Enchiridion*